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ABSTRACT

Building Bridges to the American Workplace-Employment Counseling with Immigrants and Refugees is a training session presented by the author to people in the workforce development field. The information in this article is based on the concepts presented in the training. This paper outlines the four vocational identity models used by immigrants and refugees as they move into the American world of work. The author provides information that will help workforce development program staff recognize the various models and also understand the potential assets and barriers they bring to the employment process. (GCP)

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Building Bridges to the American Workplace: Employment Counseling with Immigrants and Refugees

by
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Building Bridges to the American Workplace Employment Counseling with Immigrants and Refugees

Larry Robbin

Introduction

Building Bridges to the American Workplace - Employment Counseling With Immigrants and Refugees is a training session presented by the author to thousands of people in the workforce development field. The author has over thirty-five years of experience in the workforce development field. He has provided consultation and training services to many workforce development organizations that serve immigrants and refugees. He was one of the first Americans invited to visit China to discuss workforce development. He also has personal experience with this topic from being raised in an immigrant family environment.

The information in this article is based on the concepts presented in the training. This paper outlines the four vocational identity models used by immigrants and refugees as they move into the American world of work. The author provides information that will help workforce development program staff recognize the various models and also understand the potential assets and barriers they bring to the employment process.

Goal

The goal of this article is to build the immigrant and refugee employment counseling skills of front line staff in workforce development organizations. This information will enable front line staff to have a better understanding of the various models used by immigrants and refugees as they find their place in the American labor market.

Immigrants and refugees are a growing constituency served by almost all workforce development organizations. The transition from native country to the American workplace is full of intense challenges. The diversity of the immigrant and refugee populations and experiences can make it difficult to identify universal rights of passage that lead to successful employment in the American labor market. However, one common area shared by all immigrants and refugees is the issue of how

identity from the native culture interfaces with American job search and employment practices and traditions.

Immigrants and refugees generally take one of four paths to their place in the American labor market. They may also change paths in their journey to employment. It is helpful for workforce development staff to have an understanding of these various approaches in order to appreciate the assets and barriers they bring to the employment process. In addition, this information can be shared with the immigrants and refugees themselves. This knowledge can be used as a part of the counseling process that will enable immigrants and refugees to make the appropriate choices about how they match themselves with the American world of work.

The first model to be discussed is called the cultural identity model. People who pursue this model attempt to retain as much as possible of the traditions, dress, attitudes, diet, language and other aspects of their native culture. They do not want to assimilate into another culture. Employment program staff people sometimes inappropriately confront these individuals with the fact that their traditional approach is creating a major barrier to employment. While there is truth to this, using a confrontational challenge to traditional identity is not the right counseling approach. Employment counselors who are not immigrants and refugees themselves often alienate these people and find that they do not return for more program services.

These staff people do not understand and respect the depth of importance of retaining tradition among this population. They may not realize that what might keep this person motivated in the job search process is the strength of feeling connected to their culture and traditions. Some immigrants and refugees who totally abandon these ways often become depressed, confused, socially isolated in their community and find it difficult to get the motivation to job hunt. For some people, retaining cultural identity is a motivational asset even though it may narrow the points of labor market access to hiring.

A better approach than confrontation would be to ask the individual where he/she sees employed people who share his/her cultural identity. This information can help to define the job search market of this person. It can also help him/her evaluate the impact of his/her identity choice on labor market accessibility. Employment programs working with immigrants and refugees should also keep a data base of employers that hire people who retain traditional dress and identity. This information will be useful to people who choose the cultural identity model.

Some workplaces that may be more accepting of people pursuing this model may include non-profit organizations, government agencies, educational institutions, hotels that cater to international visitors, health care providers, ethnic restaurants and stores, businesses involved in international trade and businesses owned by people from that culture. It

is appropriate to respectfully let people know that they are narrowing their access to the full labor market by retaining their traditional ways, but it is up to the individual to make the choice of how to balance that concern with the need to preserve their cultural identity.

The second model that immigrants and refugees may choose is the opposite of the cultural identity model. This model is called the assimilationist model. People choosing this path do as much as possible to shed their native identity and try to become totally a part of the new culture. While this may open up more labor market choices, it is filled with its own challenges. For one, these people may not fully understand the new culture and their attempts to become a part of it may fail. They may do the wrong things in the job search process, dress inappropriately for interviews and appear as if they are trying to be something that they aren't. They may also experience a great deal of stress and depression as they encounter hostility from others in their own native community that view them as selling out and ending the culture.

Employment program staff that work with people who choose this model would do well to help the person get involved in volunteer work with a business organization such as a Chamber of Commerce so he/she can learn what is appropriate in the American business world as quickly as possible. Internships and volunteer experiences in businesses are also a good route to pursue on their way to employment. Employment counselors should be watching for signs of depression or the stress of social isolation that may have a severe impact on job search motivation for people working from this model. This issue may require a referral to a culturally competent counselor or therapist for further help.

Another model for immigrants and refugees is the partial assimilationist model. In the partial model individuals will maintain some aspects of native identity while at the same time presenting themselves as part of the new culture. For example, they may dress in traditional American workplace attire but have an accessory, jewelry, hairstyle or color choice that shows their traditional native style.

This approach may cause some identity confusion in those who relate to this individual in the job search process. If the position requires customer contact, the partial assimilationist identity may be seen as an employment asset or barrier depending on the customer population. The degree to which an individual chooses which culture to portray can also fluctuate. In one instance the person may appear to be more native and in another situation appear to be more mainstream American. This may cause people to react very differently to the individual depending on how he/she is on that particular day. It can be appropriate for employment counselors working with people in this model to help them choose what aspects of each culture they will portray and to try and develop some consistency in

approach. This will be especially important in job search situations that require multiple interviews or employer contacts.

Some immigrants and refugees will choose another approach that is called bi-cultural. They will have one identity for the world of work that mirrors the American cultural identity and have another traditional identity in their life outside of the world of work.

While maintaining two identities may open up doors to employment, it can also be very stressful and confusing at times. If co-workers in a workplace socialize together it can become confusing which identity to use in these situations. There can also be a tendency for values, communication styles and attitudes to inadvertently blur over from one identity to the other. If there are immigrants and refugees in the workplace who take more of a native identity approach this can be problematic for the individual that chooses a bi-cultural identity.

Employment counselors working with people who choose this strategy should help the individual more clearly define his/her work and out-of-work identities. Counselors should also keep abreast of how much stress the dual identity model is creating. In some situations where problems are occurring, it may be appropriate to ask the person if this model is really working for him/her or if is it time to consider another option. Sorting through the model options and addressing their advantages and disadvantages may help the individual clarify what approach will work for him/her.

It is important to remember that the immigrant and refugee identity models discussed in this paper can be very fluid. People will often experiment with one model and move to another. Sometimes people try a model, change models and then return to the original choice. For some people the process of being in America can be incredibly confusing and disorienting for a long period of time. Identity choices will be directly impacted by this confusion. People may also discover different role models in their own cultural group who can influence their choices. Sometimes the very choice of job or career itself will make people shift models. Getting married or into a relationship with someone from the native country who uses a different model or to someone who was born in the United States can also have an impact on model selection. The influence of friends, newly arrived relatives, elders and extended family will all contribute to this identity process. It is important that workforce development staff respect this process but at the same provide appropriate information and counseling that will help people move as successfully as possible into their niche in the American world of work.

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Summary

The routes of immigrants and refugees from their country of origin to the American world of work are very diverse. The four models presented in this paper represent very different perspectives, values, influences and experiences. As presented in this article, each of these models contains strengths and weaknesses that will be felt by each individual as he/she moves toward his/her place in the American labor market. The role of the workforce development program counselor is to respect individual choices while appropriately discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen model from an employment perspective. It is also appropriate to provide information on the other models so individuals may compare and contrast their choice with the other options. This information and the appropriate counseling support will be of great help to immigrants and refugees as they find their way successfully into the American world of work.

Conclusion

Workforce development staff face many challenges in working with the diversity of populations represented in the immigrant and refugee communities. The values of staff as they relate to the various models can be a barrier to effective employment counseling. Some staff people feel that immigrants and refugees should assimilate as much as possible and this outlook will strongly influence their work with the individual. Other staff may respect strong cultural identity choices without ever posing the issue of how this approach narrows labor market choices. Workforce development staff must acknowledge that individual identity choices may work in ways that help the individual, but also restrict some of their opportunities in the world of work. Some immigrants and refugees will sacrifice vocational progress for cultural identity. Others will sacrifice cultural identity for vocational progress. This is the balancing act that many immigrants and refugees experience as they enter this new labor market. Staff people must be careful to respect choices whileat the same time helping the individual to consider the strengths and weaknesses of all their options. The workforce development professional who can manage this paradigm will be able to help build bridges to the American workplace for immigrants and refugees.

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